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FORMER INSURGENTS TURN TO HELPING BUILD IRAQ THANKS TO PROGRAM SUPPORTED BY V CORPS DIVISION

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AL ALUM, Iraq -- More than a year ago, Moeed Maher Khalf despised Americans so much that he wanted them to either leave Iraq or die. But he knew that the United States wasn't going to pull out of the country any time soon.

So Khalf joined the insurgency in an attempt to kill as many American Soldiers as possible, but he was unsuccessful. A judge sentenced him to a year in jail for attempting to commit a crime against American troops. He declined to discuss his crime.

At the end of his sentence, he volunteered for the Civil Education Center, a program designed to rehabilitate former Iraqi prisoners.

His stint in prison, coupled with the rehabilitation program at the CEC, reformed Khalf, who says he realizes now that he was wrong about America's intentions in Iraq. His views about the Americans changed because they treated him and other prisoners well while they were in custody, Khalf said.

"There was no way for me to have contact with (Americans) before," he said the day he graduated from the program. "(But in prison) Americans treated me better. I will work now with you and get my people to help."

The CEC is much like a halfway house in America. Raid Khu Tab Helo started it. He developed the idea for the center after he visited similar programs during a recent trip to the United States.

Helo formed a partnership with V Corps' 1st Infantry Division and asked that the Big Red One division take released prisoners who choose to go through the program to his center.

"When they arrive at the facility, they don't know what to expect," said 1st Infantry Division Provost Marshal Lt. Col. Rodney Morris, who has worked with Helo.

The idea of such a program was a difficult concept for some Iraqis to grasp at first, Helo said, but he persuaded them that it was worth trying. Several others have since come on board because of the success of the program.

The men go through an orientation on the first day of the program, and are told what is expected of them. Each then spends the night with a local family that has volunteered to take the men in.

Each participant gets a change of clothes, haircut and a medical exam the following day.

Next, there is a counseling session where they talk about their problems and get peer counseling.

In the remaining two days, the men go through training on computer and Internet basics; interacting in society; the positive things that coalition forces are doing in Iraq, and elections and the importance of voting. They also write essays on the future of Iraq and are taught the difference between terrorism and Islam.

“There are other groups doing bad things, but if they know the truth, they will change,”

Khalf said. He said he’d like to be a counselor at the CEC and help coalition forces rebuild Iraq.

A brief graduation ceremony is conducted at the end of the program. Each participant receives a certificate.

The center spends about \$50 per detainee, and the funding comes from private donations, Helo said. He added that he would like to open CECs in other parts of Iraq if the funding becomes available.

Although the division transports the released prisoners to the center, the Big Red One doesn’t run the program. It’s operated solely by Helo and his Iraqi constituents and the division assists whenever possible, Morris said.

Helo added that the little help the division gives his program is tremendous, and he's grateful for it.

"Many times when I face problems, they try to do something to help me."

